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Canada's Teens: Today, Yesterday and Tomorrow

Reginald W. Bibby

Toronto: Stoddart, 2001

356 pages, \$22.95 Softcover

"Canada's teens treasure highly their freedom, friendships and music. Although the majority of Canadian youth profess faith in God, fewer and fewer youth in Canada are actively involved with organized religion." This is a view expressed recently in a public forum by a Lutheran youth pastor. It is strongly supported by research with Canadian youth that Reginald W. Bibby, who holds the Board of Governors Research Chair of the Sociology Department at the University of Lethbridge, has undertaken systematically and consistently since 1984.

"*Canada's Teens*," notes Bibby, "releases extensive new data on Canadian young people and adults produced through two new national surveys carried out in 2000. But it also draws on our previous youth surveys in 1984 and 1992, and our adult surveys carried out every five years dating back to 1975 - a total of seven other surveys in total." (vii) "To get a comprehensive reading of teens today, I engaged in lengthy conversations with some 3,500 young people, aged 15 to 19, in the late spring and early fall of 2000." (6)

At the outset, Bibby refutes two views regarding youth that are often held to be true: 1) "What teens are like today is what they will be like as adults tomorrow"; and 2) "Today's teens will control tomorrow's world." Bibby calls these "false assumptions". And so they are. We need to recognize that we live in "an intergenerational world", one in which youth need to be respected and honoured for who they are. (5)

This text, which is descriptive of Canadian youth now and before 2000, is divided into three distinct yet interrelated sections. Part 1 deals with "Teens Today"; Part 2 focuses on "Teens Yesterday"; Part 3 reflects on "Teens Tomorrow". While each of these divisions provides valuable insights into youth at different generational standpoints and at different stages of life, there is also a lot of correlation and comparison between the data from each of the sections. The charts are presented in an easy-to-read manner. The narrative descriptions and reflections, provided by the author, give the reader ready access to narratives from the interviewees and to pertinent extrapolations and interpretations from the author of the study.

I very much appreciate Bibby's starting point for Part 1, "Teens Today". It is: "If I wanted to get to know you, what you are really like, at some point I would want to know what you care deeply about. I'd want to know your values, what you want out of life, and what you think is important in the course of pursuing your goals." (11) I believe that one of the reasons Bibby's studies are so readily received - both in process and as product - is that people appreciate having their viewpoints respected and taken seriously. Teens in particular, who often feel that their views don't count in the adult world, give frequent voice to their appreciation for Bibby's research. There's a real sense in which Bibby is calling forth the significant youth voices on life in Canada!

In terms of teens today, Bibby writes:

What we found is that there is nothing teenagers value more highly than *friendship* and *freedom*. Close to nine in ten place high levels of importance on being linked to friends while simultaneously having the freedom to live life as they see fit. Not surprisingly, the related traits of *being loved* and *having choices* are also among the characteristics teens value the most. (11)

What are some traits that teens value in the pursuit of their goals? What are some of their "means" values? This study discovered that:

Their top-rated 'means' values are *honesty* and *humour*. They place high value on integrity and they also like to be able to laugh. ... Rounding out the top three instrumental values is *cleanliness*, highly valued by seven in ten females and six in ten males.(15)

[Whenever I've reported this value to parents, I have gotten real surprised looks and expressions from them! Or perhaps it's not surprising!]

When it comes to enjoyment, the "two most important sources of enjoyment for both male and female teens are *friends* and *music*.... As for music, it's worth noting that almost 90% of teenagers listen to music every day." (20) "Consistent with what teens say they enjoy, on a *daily basis* a majority are watching TV, listening to music, and spending time with friends." (28) It's clear that friends and relationships are primary with teens. "Teenagers value good relationships, being loved

and concern for other people.” (68) “It is noteworthy that more than half of all teen females and males indicate they are receiving a high level of enjoyment from grandparents, in good and not-so-good family times.” (56) Indeed, we live in an intergenerational world!

It’s probably also significant to note that if teens experience problems, they will turn to friends first and family for help. Many of them also “experience a fair amount of conflict with them” [their parents]. (62) Apart from actual involvement in organized religion - “one in four people claim to attend services close to every week” (114) - “it’s highly significant that some 75% of young people identify with a religious group, stating a preference such as Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, Islam, or something else.”(117)

Today’s Millennials are also expressing explicit spiritual interests and needs. Some 40% of females and 35% of males report that their friends are interested in spirituality. Further, 55% of females and 40% of males say that they personally have spiritual needs. (121)

Religious groups need to take note!

In the second section, Yesterday’s Teens, Bibby devotes some particular attention to the Boomer Generation (1943-1960), Generation X (1961-1981), and to the Millennial Generation (1982 to the present). He notes, in particular, that in describing characteristics of each, one needs to be careful in using the word “generation” as well as “modern” and “postmodern”. It is so easy to assume that “if they are living in a postmodern world, they must be exhibiting postmodern traits, whatever they are.” (167) Yet, it is of interest that Bibby’s research shows that:

What young people want out of life and how they see themselves going about getting there have changed little over time. Of course, technological resources have changed. But what teens want and what they value have tended to remain steady. A measure of disillusionment with institutions is apparent. Yet ongoing commitment to marriage and children means that old institutions are not necessarily being abandoned, while increases in confidence in governments suggest that disenchantment with institutional structures is not necessarily permanent. (204)

Bibby is somewhat surprised in “finding that teens at the beginning of the ‘90s and teens today have almost *identical levels of expectations* about just about everything . . .” (205) “A comparison of today’s Canadian teens, essentially young Millennials, with those of 1984 and 1992 - older and younger Gen Xers, respectively - shows considerable consistency in a large number of areas.” (203)

In Part 3, Tomorrow’s Teens, Bibby notes that:
as things stand, teenagers generally are going to turn out just fine by most people’s standards. The vast majority of 15- to -19 -year-olds are a positive presence within Canadian life right now. They’ll stay that way unless they take some turn for the worse on their way to adulthood. (264)

“Our brief extrapolation from our findings about teenagers present and past suggests that, when today’s tweens become teens, they will resemble their older sisters and brothers in a number of areas, including values, sources of enjoyment, personal concerns, and expectations. What is not as clear is whether they will follow in their older siblings’ footsteps when it comes to such things as the value they place on group life, concern about violence, the influence of changing technology on interaction with others, intergroup relations, religious involvement, and the long-range question of what they - as part of the Millennial generation - will eventually accomplish.” (310-311)

Anyone involved in Canadian youth ministry, of whatever nature, will want to read and work with what is presented so effectively in *Canada’s Teens*. One hopes that Bibby does a follow-up study by 2005!

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